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In Less Than a Breath

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I toss down another cup of coffee and push my chair back from the table. I want to stand, but I force myself to sit. My hands are shaking and my stomach is tight. "Never drink coffee before a meet," Jerry Schneider, my coach, has told me time and again. This is my fifth cup, and I may have another. I wish I would vomit, show some tangible sign of illness, but instead, I am so charged now that I can barely remain in my chair.

The North Face chalet is deserted. A half hour from now, the officials will close the ski jump and the coaches and the competitors will come in for some "carbs"—twinkies, or candy bars, anything for that last boost.

The high school kids will struggle and fight through the line first, the hoch team will follow, and then will come the veterans and the coaches in their Sorrels and tube-top parkas. I am on the hoch team, the high team. I wear the Minneapolis Ski Club's red and white jumpsuit, and ski on the club's best equipment, though I haven't done so for long.

Until regionals last year, Kip Sorenson had the club's top spot. Kip used to be a hockey player and jumped like that, crazy and violent. On the thirty and forty meter hills no one could come close to Kip for sheer distance, and he knew it.

Kip jackknifed, bent at the waist over his skis, almost imperceptibly at first. When we moved to the Bush Lake sixty, and I began to match Kip's distance scores, he pushed harder, and jackknifed worse. Jerry told me Kip would lose his distance advantage on the big jumps, the seventy and ninety meter.

And he did. I finally beat him at Chester, a jump in Duluth. He shook my hand after his last run, a big, lopsided grin on his face, and after that night we tied every other meet, Kip hurling himself always further, while I held back, forcing my shoulders to curve over my skis and my arms to lie flat at my sides.

It went like that until early this month, when I got in two good runs at our central-division tournament, and Kip was late on his second, nearly digging a hole in the crest of the hill with his skis. I picked up my trophy, an ugly gold-plated thing, then drove toward highway twelve on Wirth Boulevard feeling elated. At home I got a phone call from Jerry. The national team in Vermont wanted to see what I could do at Ironwood, Michigan, where a one-hundred-twenty meter jump had been built on Copper Peak.

"Don't get too excited," he said.

"Why do you say that?"

Jerry cleared his throat.

"Why did you—"

"I told them we'd think about it."

"What do you mean, 'think about it?' "

"Maybe by the end of this year. . . . Look, it's not like I said you don't have—"

"What did they think of Sorenson?"

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe."

Jerry wanted me to wait—and even moreso Kip—but we packed our van and went to Michigan anyway. The whole trip was a fiasco. On the highway heavy snow swirled around us like dense fog. Jerry pressed his face to the windshield, cursing in a low, gutteral German. Kip sat beside him, cracking his knuckles, and I watched the yellow signs flash by from the back seat.

The first morning at Copper Peak we sidestepped to the top of the landing hill, the knoll, and back down, flattening the wind crust that had formed during the night. Then a jumper set the track, and the first man after him hooked over his skis and had to pull hard to keep his tips from dropping.

"It's damned fast," Jerry said, standing on the flats. He shook his head. "You see that, Vogel? The whole track up there is black ice."

I said I'd noticed it.

Kip pushed his cap back and squinted into the sun. "Could slow down a bit, don't you think?" he said. He cocked his head sideways, then grinned, his eyes puckering under his brows, his lips twisting in the corners. I'd seen him grin like that coming back from a jump in Duluth once. Battle Creek it was called. We were tanked up on mad dog after a meet, howling down a back street of some nowhere town in Kip's '53 Biscayne, our wet wool suits stinking and the radio blaring Kip's favorite tune, Crocodile Rock. We passed a truck on a narrow bridge and Kip just railed right through, scraping our fender on the truck's bumper.

I turned around to see the driver of the truck stop in the middle of the road. He jumped out of the cab and shook his fist over his head and Kip turned to me and smiled that joker's smile.

"Good as, right?"

Right. Good as a mile. I watch the waitress fill the cocoa dispenser behind the counter, then turn back to my coffee cup and poke at the brown grains in the bottom. I don't know what I'll say to Jerry and my teammate, Paul Halvorsen, when they come in, what excuse I'll use.

"Would you like a warm-up?"

I'm surprised and jerk back in my chair. The waitress has her arm poised above my cup. She pours, my cup warms, then burns my hand.

"Nice night for a meet, isn't it?" she says.

I nod and turn away from her, face the newly spackled wall where my skis hang from a rack. Tonight they look like torpedoes, or bombs, or long blue bullets.

Since the accident, I've gone over them a dozen times, adjusting the heel blocks and cables. They said Kip should have come out of his bindings

when he fell. But Jerry and I were watching from the bottom, and we could see that his staying in the bindings didn't have much to do with anything.

I rock back in my chair, anxious still, only this time I stand, then walk to the stairs and outside, my hands crammed into my pockets. Along the path to the jump the snow stands waist high, and a cold breeze rustles the dry and brittle leaves in the oaks. Flood lights from the hill cast hard-edged shadows across the path, and I can smell the kerosene heaters in the judges' box.

From there the coaches shout at jumpers in mid-flight.

"HANDS BACK!"

A jumper in a red suit darts by the judges' box and over the knoll. I check my step, listening. There is a hard, distant slap, plastic on ice, then the jumper spits out onto the flats.

The path widens and I climb to the crest of the hill. At the top of the scaffolding another jumper waits. Jerry yells from the judges' box, "LET'S SEE YOU HIT IT RIGHT THIS TIME, HALVORSEN!"

Halvorsen, high and tiny on the platform, waves for an all clear, gets it from the judges' box, then slams a ski against the backboards and rattles down the in-run.

His chest is too high, his legs too stiff.

"GET OFF YOUR HEELS!" Jerry yells.

Paul rocks forward, his ski tips pass the pine boughs, and late, he lunges out, "UNH!" jackknifing so badly he's got to pull his legs up under him, so his skis don't nose into the hill. Then he drops out of sight, and there is that slapping of skis on ice. On the flats he turns to a stop, a rainbow plume jetting behind him. I clamber down the icy steps alongside the landing hill, hugging the rail, then wait at the bottom.

Out by the snow fencing that separates the flats from the river, Halvorsen shoulders his skis, then strides toward me and the stairs.

"How's it going?" I yell.

He shrugs his shoulders, but at the stairs, kicks the bottom step. "You saw it."

"You're looking better."

"Right," he says. Facing the landing hill, he talks through the side of his mouth. "Anyway . . . I thought Jerry was gonna get another toe-piece for your binding?"

There's no meanness in Paul, but he's always direct.

I nod.

Paul tugs at the strap on his helmet and glances in my direction, not quite meeting my eyes; then, he mounts the stairs, his skis swaying on his shoulder.

Before the accident in Michigan, it was Sorenson, Halvorsen, and me. Teammates, all through high school. Every autumn Jerry had us run the lakes in town, and when the snow fell, we'd side-step the landing hills

at Wirth, Carver Park, and Bush Lake, our legs shaking and lungs heaving. Then we'd ski down, practicing telemark landings, getting back the feel of our skis.

Our meets started in late December, with the local competitions, and ended the first week of March, with the regionals. We'd drive out to Wirth or Bush or Carver five days a week those months, jostling each other, laughing, Kip singing Olivia Newton John songs I hated.

He did things you weren't supposed to do, and he got us doing them too. When Jerry drove the van onto the service road at Bush Lake, Kip ran behind and got a hold on the bumper, hooky-bobbing on his feet until Jerry stopped to chew him out. While Kip was getting a talking to we'd all scramble around the back and find a good place to hang on. Sometimes Kip would buy cough syrup, the codeine stuff, and we'd all get stoned and go jumping.

He crashed a lot, but he got better.

At a new hill, Kip was always the first to take a run. Each hill was a surprise, each had some special characteristic: there was a drop-off in Eau Claire's out-run, one that tossed you on your heels in the transition; at Bush Lake, a hook in the scaffolding threw you off to the right side of the landing hill, near a stand of trees; and at Chester, a perpetual wind crossed the knoll, threatening to turn you on your side, mid-air, if you weren't careful.

Sometimes I told Kip he was an idiot.

On bitter-cold weekends he'd call me.

"Let's go," he'd say.

"It's ten fucking degrees below zero, Kip."

"So what?" he'd say, and I could just see his face.

Before kicking off the platform he'd catch your eye and nod, just once, as though he were tipping his hat. Then he'd slam off the platform, his arms held tightly in front of him, as though he were preparing to throw a punch. Gaining speed, he shifted from side to side, rocked on his squat legs to the bottom, then hurled himself off the jump and into the dark.

Like cutting glass, I'd hiss down the in-run after him, riding smooth over my skis, my body compressed and elastic. Toward the bottom I'd roll to the balls of my feet, and a hand's width before my ski tips crossed the pine boughs, I levered myself up and over the knoll. The hill dropped away then, and a great Ohhhhhh! hummed in my chest.

It happened so fast you had to get more of it—it was like a flavor, one you couldn't quite identify.

Tournament nights, on the platform, you could smell hot paraffin from the jumpers waxing their skis; flood lights telescoped the length of the in-run like brilliant bluish pearls, and there was an utter stillness before each jumper's run. Down the scaffolding shadows spun about each jumper like hands on a clock, and from the landing hill, Jerry would yell, "HIYA! HIYA! HIYA!," dancing in his Sorrels. Sometimes my folks and sisters stood

on the flats, and from the top I could almost pick them out of all the people clustered there.

After the meets we'd cruise Theodore Wirth Parkway, the windows of Kip's car open wide, Kip singing, our skis on the roof rack jutting over the windshield, where everybody could see them.

Jerry is yelling again, his voice harsh, demanding. Halvorsen launches himself from the scaffolding, falling a good distance, his skis nearly perpendicular to the landing hill; he slaps down on the out-run and squirts through the transition, his hands braced on the snow behind him, another zero-style-point landing.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see Jerry is watching me. He leans out of the judge's box, his gloved hands clasped in front of him. I turn back toward the chalet, scuffing through the snow on the path. A low oak branch snags my jacket and I tear loose from it. When I reach the back door, I jerk it open, pulling the return spring free with a snap. Behind the counter the waitress bustles, arranging candy bars and cakes on a long plastic tray.

The fluorescent lights inside glow blue and fuzzy, the walls press inward, and the air is stuffy and hot. I knock a chair back from the table nearest the door and sit, gripping the table top.

I feel like I'm falling through my seat, just tumbling end over end, like Kip in Michigan.

They said it was the sun, the sun had softened up the landing hill, making the snow a bit sticky there.

It was a headwind, pulled him off balance.

It was the fault of the bindings, their not releasing when he fell.

A ways past the five-hundred-foot marker, he met the landing hill in a telemark, smiling, his fist raised. But in the transition he was jerked backwards, his head striking first. A patch of blue ice.

And on the way out to Wirth this afternoon, in the van, while Jerry and Halvorsen argued about waxes, I unscrewed one of my toe-clips with my car keys and pocketed it. When we got to the hill, I noticed it was missing.

"You lost a toe-clip?" Jerry said.

I pressed the ski toward him, fumbling for something to say; his eyes went somewhere, far away from me, then he climbed the hill to the judge's box. Watching his square, thick shouldered back move up the hill, I got a sensation of shrinking into myself.

That last morning, Jerry had argued with the national team coach, just yards from us on the flats.

"It's not a good time," Jerry said.

"Well, when will be a good time?"

"This afternoon it might warm up. The track's pretty fast."

"I think you should send them down. Tell them to give it a sled-ride the first few runs."

"I'd like to think they could do that," Jerry said.

"Hell, my twelve-year-old boy's skied down the landing hill."

"Maybe I'll have them do that," Jerry said, his voice poking out the words.

Kip and I stood with our backs to them, looking at the jump. the landing hill alone had to be over seven hundred feet long, most of it a good fifty-per-cent grade or better, and above it, the scaffolding stretched to a tiny red point.

"What do you think?" I said to Kip.

Kip swung from side to side, from one foot to the other.

I breathed deep, the cold air sharp in my chest. "Don't go if you're not ready, Kip," I said.

He turned to look at me, frowning, his eyes puckered.

Five jumpers in electric-blue suits stopped midway up the landing hill to pummel down a high spot. They moved in formation, raising and lowering their skis as though they were no heavier than shoes. The bottom man slapped the tail of his ski down and a hand sized chunk of snow broke loose. It gained speed, then leaped high into the air and came down again and again, breaking into smaller pieces, all of them careening their way to the flats. The bottom man pointed, then spread his arms wide.

A second later the jumpers' laughter floated down to us.

"Assholes," Kip said. He balanced on the balls of his feet, his steel toe-pieces snapping through the hardpacked snow.

"Looks like quite a ride," I said.

Kip jerked his head in the direction of the landing hill. "They don't seem too impressed."

"No," I said.

"A few runs and we'll be right up there with those guys, what do you say?"

"It's big."

"Sure it's big."

I looked at him askance and he stared back.

"I can do it," he said.

Jerry stepped away from the other coach, and Kip glanced over at him, then turned back to me.

"Remember that first time you went off Chester?" he said.

I pulled my hat back, watching Jerry, who was nudging the snow with his boots. "Yeah, I remember."

"Jerry said you looked like you were screaming all the way down."

I shook my head. We hadn't jumped Chester in two years, not since that night I beat Kip there. I liked Chester, but it was too small now.

"This isn't Chester, Kip," I said. "If you miss here, you're gonna fall a *long* way."

Kip blew a puff of air out his mouth. "Don't gimme that crap, Alex. I beat you a long time at Chester before any of this happened."

"Things change, Kip," I said.

Jerry came up behind us, and Kip turned sharply to him.

"You all set?" Jerry said.

The terrace door slams, and boots rumble across the ceiling toward the stairway. The Bernard fills with the jumpers and coaches, and the smell of hot coffee warms the frigid air rushing in from outside.

Jerry sits with the coach from the St. Paul Ski Club, and Paul Halvorsen, poised between Jerry's table and mine, a Hostess fruit pie in his hand, turns in my direction.

"Got in some nice runs," he says.

I pick at my fingernails and shift in my chair. Around us the coaches and jumpers laugh, their voices thick with false bravery, and I feel a pressure in my arms, a desire to fling my coffee cup against the wall where my skis hang from the rack.

Halvorsen takes a bite of his pie, and, shifting the filling to one side of his mouth, says, "You oughta take a run before the meet. The track's real smooth." He swallows and takes another bite.

"Maybe I will," I say. I crush Paul's pie wrapper into a little ball and flick it off the edge of the table.

Paul clears his throat, then mumbles something through a mouthful of pie. I lean forward, and he says, "Shit. . . ." He smiles, then holds out the pie. "See this?"

I look into the glossy cherry filling, wondering what Paul wants me to see, and before I can pull my head back he shoves the pie into my nose.

"Very funny, Paul."

He laughs so hard his eyes glaze up.

"I don't think that's funny," I say.

"Christ, don't take everything so damn serious."

I hold my hands against my thighs and raise my head. "You weren't there."

"Right. And you aren't going to let me forget it, either, are you?"

I push the table away and stand, then walk easy to the stairs. I pull my skis from the rack on the wall and heft them onto my shoulder. They weigh nothing. I know I should leave, now, before this thing in me is too big, but I am held back. At the table, Paul is perched on the back of his chair. Jerry is watching, too, a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Come on, Alex," Paul says, his arms outstretched, inviting me back to the table. "Shit. . . ."

I grit my teeth, holding it in, but the words escape me like a convulsion. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Paul?"

Paul's face reddens.

"You think this is gonna make you better? Is that it? Is this the way you're gonna get better?"

Paul stares off toward the counter.

"I'm talking to you, *Paul*."

The others huddle over their tables. Jerry pushes his chair back, then stands, his face swollen.

"Fuck you," Paul says.

I feel my mouth twisting into what must be an ugly sneer. " 'Fuck you' is right!" I jab back. "If you had even half the guts—It would still take a miracle—do you hear me, Paul?—it would take a miracle, for you to even *PISS* off a jump without FALLING ON YOUR ASS. DO YOU HEAR ME, *PAUL*?"

I charge up the stairs, then slam through the back door onto the terrace. The stars are out, hard pinpricks of light above the oaks. My breathing is shallow and forced, then jerking in gasps. I tear my feet through the snow on the path to the jump and stand on the knoll, my hands clenched into fists. Nothing, but nothing, has come of this. Nothing. Just a big hole where Kip used to be. And this club, this piss-ant club, the best I'll ever know.

Down on Wirth Parkway a car horn blares. Then there is that hush.

From the knoll, all of East Minneapolis spiderwebs out in patterns of yellow and blue lights. A pale reflection of the moon hovers over the river. A northwest wind blows, cooling my cheeks. With the toe of my boot I chip through the icy crust in the center of the hill, feeling the layers, the giving way of the crystal snow, and then the ice again, unyielding.

The flood lights come on and the hill is a brilliant white ribbon set against a hillside of dark limbed oaks. A judge scrambles around me with the marking chain. " 'lo," he says. He pounds a spike into the top of the hill and stretches the chain down the landing hill. The caners shuttle by me, their poles held high. They position themselves all the way to the transition, where the flats spread into the darkness and into the river.

Halvorsen and Jerry climb the stairs from the chalet with the others. Jerry turns to me and says, "Your binding still on the blink?" He waits, long enough to shake his head, then slides down the hill to the judges' box, bumping against the embankment on the other side, Halvorsen following on his heels.

The night chill has set in, and a few latecomers take practice runs. Most of them jackknife: with their legs extended like stoppers, they crash down on the tails of their skis and ride the out-run to the bottom, hands braced against the snow behind them.

Jerry stares at me from the judges' box, looking more sad than angry now.

I pat the breast pocket of my jump suit, and feel the lump there.

Then, a jumper sets the track, and the meet begins. I hide from Jerry in the shadows under the scaffolding. Behind me, jumpers stand in line by number.

There is a ticking in the scaffolding, a rush of air, then a wooden slap! and an "Awwww" rises from the flats. There must be a hundred-and-fifty people watching, from the sound of it. I know the last man has fallen, has gotten zero points for style. I wait to hear his distance P.A.'d from the judges' box.

One-hundred-and-sixty feet.

On a clean, fast night like tonight, I can break one-ninety-five on this jump. Kip could do better than two-ten.

The scaffolding rattles, again. Then again, and Halvorsen, his back to me, is on his way up.

I carry my Elans to the tool boxes on the Bernard side of the jump, and heft a piece of paraffin from the box nearest me. On my right, a jumper melts wax with a butane torch, touching up his skis. The smell puts me on top for a second, on the platform, where I can see for miles. Then there is a sensation of motion. But it fades, and I can't get it back. I turn my skis over and run my hand down the P-tex bases. Under the flood lights the bases glow a warm yellow, but are slick and cold to the touch. In sharp, even circles, I force the wax into the bases. Then I am hammering at them, whacking the bases with the paraffin block, leaving big sticky swatches of wax.

There is that smell again, that sense of motion.

I won't stay down here anymore, sick with fear and wanting. I pull the toe clip from my pocket and twist it back into the binding with a screwdriver. The screwdriver blade skips out of the toe piece, poking my hand so it bleeds. I rub snow into the cut, then pull on my gloves, and check my heel blocks and cables. I shoulder my skis, and step into line, then climb the scaffolding. From there everything looks so small, the pebble-sized upturned faces, the strip of snow through the oaks narrowing to a point.

Then I am on top with four others, swaying with the wind, pumping my skis back and forth to shake the stiffness from my legs. The sky bulges from the point where I stand. There is that smell again, and the cool wind on my face.

The jumper before me is off, and I step into the center track. It is as though I am watching myself from a faraway place.

A hundred faces are raised below me, white hollows with dark centers, and the horizon yawns wide from the end of the jump. A chainer waves the all clear.

The scaffolding groans in the breeze.

I snap my right leg back, the ski hits the backboard, and I slide out and over the edge of the platform, dropping, whoomp! onto the steep in-run. It is like my head is being pulled off, the blackness and lights and trees and faces bursting through me. And faster, everything is sharp, intense, as if packed with light, distorted with speed and height, compressed below, lengthened at my side. I shift forward, my chest riding elastic above my legs. the support beams whoosh, whoosh, whoosh by, my legs somewhere beneath me, *they know what to do*, and now the ramp curves out and the pine boughs rise up, grow larger, and the two tracks there gleam, and my skis are damp and smooth, and I roll forward, feel myself falling, and at that moment I burst off the ramp. A brilliant white flash nearly blinds me, and everything says "Stand Up!" as the knoll drops out from under me, but I lay out over my skis, and the air beneath

them buoys me up, and I push further into the horizon, head out, arms at my sides, the faces below glowing, and I fall a long, long distance, weightless, skimming on a sheet of air, and at the last possible moment, when I will be crushed on the hill if I do not land, my legs pull under me, my skis meet the hard snow in slap, and in the transition, like coming up the next rise on a roller coaster, I am pushed down, then shot onto the flats, standing now, gliding toward the river, all of it singing in me.

Wayne D. Johnson